

# Multilingualism, Francophony and the Perspectives of the Romanian Education\*

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**ABSTRACT:** According to the relevant norms of national and international law, the right to education is consecrated as a fundamental human right. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals, as prescribed by the UN 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development, included as Goal no. 4 the “quality education.” Multilingualism in international relations and organizations and within the national education systems represents important pillars from this perspective. The Francophone identity and its cultural, educational, and political dimensions are essential parts of this topic. The COVID-19 pandemic’s dramatic impact on human development and education increased their relevance and necessity nevertheless. Romania is an important actor of the organization called “Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie” (OIF), including at the level of national school and university educational systems in French language and promotes through political European, and international mechanisms and policies the principle of multilingualism.

**KEY WORDS:** education, sustainable development, pandemic, multilingualism, Francophone, Romania

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## Introduction

The right to education is consecrated both in national and public international law, as well as the international literature review (Renucci 2012, 612) as man's fundamental right. In the national law, it is settled by constitutions and laws, as the case of article 32 (right to education) in Romania's Constitution (1991, rev. 2003) and is respectively guaranteed in the international law by specific norms. As an example, the right to education and (in certain texts) to professional training is consecrated internationally (Hennebel and Tigroudja 2016, 1222-1223) first of all in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 26), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (articles 28 and 29) in 1989. Regionally, we are first interested in international treaties in the area of fundamental rights and freedoms adopted by the Council of Europe, the leading institution in the field of democracy and human rights, where we first observe the European Convention of Human Rights, the first and most important multilateral treaty (Radu 2018, 7) signed by the mentioned pan-European organization. We specifically mention the provisions (of the first) Protocol of the European Convention of Human Rights (article 2), but also a whole set of conventions on the recognition of academic qualifications (Council of Europe, 2021) or in the field of educational policy and cultural heritage. At the same time, I could mention the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (article 14), since regionally, I could mention for other continents the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (article 17). In other words, as mentioned by the literature review, the actions and documents of the United Nations, the Council of Europe and other international organizations take education as an *absolute priority* (Tomescu and Corlăţean 2017, 125).

It is no surprise then that for the United Nations, the political and key action priorities, such as the case of the concept of sustainable development, for instance, included "the right to education" as a structural component. The right to development, doubled at the beginning, in the 60s-70s, by the concept of "a new economic international order" (Daillier, Forteau and Pellet 2009, 1176) mainly due to ideological reasons, progressed in the last couple of decades towards a global vision, that of "sustainable development." In other words, a vision and a process to develop humanity was necessary,

meant to meet current needs, considering the imperatives of the need to protect the environment and the rational usage of resources, without endangering the capacity of future generations to cover their own needs. This vision is impossible without treating the right to education of the current and future generations from a truly strategic perspective internationally. “Rio Declaration” on June 13, 1992, adopted by the UN Conference on Environment and Development represented the main milestone together with a set of objectives known as Agenda 21, being preceded in 1972 by the Stockholm Declaration, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. They have gradually prepared the key political decision adopted by the UN member states at the UN Sustainable Development Summit on September 25-27, under the UN Resolution: A/RES/70/1, entitled “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. The UN Agenda 2030 for sustainable development sets 17 key global goals and respectively 169 specific goals for humanity. These objectives are integrated and indivisible and highlight the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environment (Ibidem). Naturally, one of the main action lines is concerns the transposition of the Agenda 2030 as to the level of a global agenda via planned implementation actions nationally and locally (Council of Europe, 2019).

Out of these, Goal 4 (“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”; Ibidem) would consecrate the imperative of ensuring *quality, inclusive and fair education*, as well as the need to promote educational opportunities for all during the lifetime. For this, one of the necessary conditions resulting from the series of documents and implementation strategies internationally, including those adopted in Europe, refers to ensuring *multilingualism in the educational process*. From this perspective, francophony covers a special place, including the cultural, political and organizational width of this phenomenon internationally, as well as its *impact on educational processes*.

## **Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on education**

COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the international society both in terms of health, from the point of view of individuals’ health, and a larger socio-economic level. Obviously, the impact on the educational system was

huge in the context of restrictive and isolation measures adopted by states, including the closure of schools and universities. The right of children to education was seriously affected, given the complexity of risks and challenges for the educational system and for individuals, generated by the pandemic. According to UNESCO, only for April 2020, practically at the debut of the pandemic, approximately 1.7 billion students were affected by this scourge. In terms of statistics, 80% of those involved in education faced major losses in academic terms for the year to come, including endangering future economic growth rates or incomes in various activities (Wilkerson 2020, *Forbes.com*). In this context, the experts of the World Economic Forum showed that 1.2 billion students had to abandon courses in the first part of the pandemic as schools were closed (Li and Lalani 2020, *Weforum.org*).

At the same time, the crisis generated a series of opportunities for the educational systems, first due to an accelerated promotion of e-learning educational opportunities, digital and virtual distance education platforms, stimulating the technological progress, but also the partnerships and cooperation between public, governmental actors and the operators in the private sector or actors in the civil society (Onestini 2020, *Development.asia*). Obviously, without being able to eliminate the existence of real gaps and discrimination generated by poverty, the difference between resources available among various world zones or even inside the same state or the treatment provided politically and culturally to more vulnerable groups (see the discriminating treatment applied to young and adult females in the developing countries in Africa, in restricting Islamic environments (International Institute for Educational Planning – UNESCO, 2020, “COVID-19 et fermeture des écoles: pourquoi les filles sont plus à risque (COVID-19 school closures: Why girls are more at risk”, 29 Avril 2020 etc.).

In both cases, one can conclude that the pandemic changed education forever (Li and Lalani 2020, *Weforum.org*).

## **Multilingualism and Francophony in education and international institutions**

The impact of COVID-19 on education did not diminish in any way the relevance of the UN Agenda 2030 for sustainable development, on the

contrary. Moreover, in a globalized international society, interconnected and where performance criteria make a difference, the need to *promote multilingualism in educational systems emerged increasingly*.

One knows that UN gradually elaborated a whole set of resolutions ([www.digitallibrary.un.org](http://www.digitallibrary.un.org)), conventions and other documents, but also action strategies and public policies to promote the goal of multilingualism as a fundamental value of the organization contributing to the UN objectives as they are set in the UN Charter (UN Resolution A/RES/73/346 adopted by the General Assembly on 16 September 2019). These instruments and strategies refer both to the UN internal organization and functioning (Implementation of multilingualism in the United Nations system, JIU/REP/2002/11), as well as rapport established in international relationships, including educational policies, as we noted in the case of sectorial specific goals in Goal 4 of UN Agenda 2020 for sustainable development.

A special chapter in the area of multilingualism, both internationally and regionally, goes to *francophony*.

The concept of francophony came out in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century referring to countries and individuals able to use French. This gets the meaning known today, several decades later, when francophones realize the existence of a linguistic space suitable for cultural exchange. Humanists initiated this movement, a relatively natural endeavor considering the significance played by France in the universal linguistic heritage (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

Institutional francophony emerged on March 20, 1970, once the Niamey Convention was signed (initially called Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique, turned in 2005 into Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie – OIF), developing actions of international politics and political, educational, economic and cultural multilateral cooperation among the 88 states and governments currently part of OIF ([www.francophonie.org](http://www.francophonie.org)). 20 March is celebrated each year as the International Day of Francophony, and the headquarters of this organization is in Paris.

The key missions of francophony are:

- Promoting French, multilingualism and cultural diversity
- Promoting peace, democracy and human rights
- Supporting education, training, higher education and research
- Developing economic cooperation for sustainable development.

The Secretary General of the organization, the OIF administrator, the Parliamentary Assembly of Francophony, the Association of Francophone Universities (AUF, one of OIF operators), the permanent conference of the ministers of education, as well a series of strategic partners, NGOs and other structures such as L'Alliance Française could be mentioned as relevant for the action to promote the principle of multilingualism and francophony in education within institutional structures (Ibidem).

The respective organization gradually developed a series of strategies and mechanisms to promote the use of French internationally in the systems of national education and in international organizations, including regionally (see *Vade-mecum relatif à l'usage de la langue française dans les organisations internationales, adopté par la CMF le 26 septembre 2006*).

According to OIF data, French is the 5<sup>th</sup> most spread language in the world, being used by about 300 million people on all continents. Two hundred thirty-five million use French daily, and 90 million people are native speakers. In 2018, 80 million students studied French. According to OIF, it is likely that in 2050 the number of French speakers in the world will reach 700 million, mainly given the demographic increase in francophone African countries ([www.francophonie.org](http://www.francophonie.org)). French is the language of school instruction in 36 states and respectively the official language in 32 states and governments in the world. According to these statistics, French is the second language presented as a foreign language, following English, for 81 million people. It is the second business language in Europe and the third in the world, the 4<sup>th</sup> on the internet and the 2<sup>nd</sup> used language in international organizations.

For France, especially, francophony represents huge stakes culturally, educationally, and politically, which raises the influence in international relations on several levels, starting with the political and culminating with the cultural and economic one. No surprise then that France prepares the future Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first semester of 2022, including efforts to consolidate the role of French in European structures. It refers to a series of assessments and statistics about, among others, the legal foundations of multilingualism and the use of French in EU institutions, the current status of its being used in official and working documents, in the translation of documents or in official or informal meetings, in the external relations of the EU, the allocated budgets, the trends

recorded during the last years etc., elements to support the actual strategies and actions, including the budgets to be allocated in the future with the aim to consolidate the profile and the role of French at the European level and, in a wider sense, in the European society. In this respect, French authorities have already launched on April 8, 2021, the working group on francophony and multilingualism in EU institutions, in the presence of state secretaries in the French government in charge of francophony and respectively European affairs (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, n.d.). The mentioned group is led by Christian Lequesne, professor of political science, former director at CERI (Centre de Recherches Internationales) and has the mission to present the report with the conclusions and action recommendations on September 1, 2021, in order to allow the French government to undertake in due time the measures necessary to promote the mentioned objective in the EU institutions. This will happen in the context in which 19 states and government members of the Union are simultaneously members of OIF. The activity of the group starts with the objectives stated by the President of France in his strategy on March 20, 2018 (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, 2021), meant to render French the fore-front place and rank in the world, while respecting multilingualism, including in the geographical space of the European Union.

## **Romania and promoting multilingualism and francophony**

OIF is the first international organization Romania joined after the fall of communism, in 1993, being granted full membership at the Sommet in Maurius. In 2007, Romania was appointed “état-far” of francophony in the region. In 2004, our country hosted the Antenna of francophony, turned in 2014 into a regional office and in 2020, respectively, the regional head office. In 2006, Romania hosted the 11<sup>th</sup> Sommet of Francophonie and it exerts the rotating presidency of the organization between 2006-2008. In 2017, the President of the Rectors Council is elected President of the International Organization de la francophonie, a role maintained in the present. Symbolically, in 2013, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Romania and the General Mayor of the Capital in Bucharest launch la Place de la Francophonie (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania, 2013), located near

the Palace of the Parliament, the only square dedicated to francophony at that time in the European space, including the francophone one.

From the perspective of promoting French and cultural diversity in Romania, relating it to multilingualism and francophony especially, including the Romanian educational system, the following elements are relevant.

Firstly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE) runs the Eugen Ionescu Program of Doctoral and Post-doctoral research scholarship. The program operates uninterruptedly since 2007, Romania being the only country providing such a scholarship program within OIF. MAE has provided so far scholarships to 950 doctoral and post-doctoral researchers from 39 countries, mostly from Africa. In 2021, 39 universities and research institutes in Romania were involved in this program. MAE runs the scholarships, with the support of the International Organization de la francophonie (AUF-ECO, based in Bucharest). Every year, the Eugen Ionescu scholar's day takes place either at the Presidential Administration, in the presence of that year's graduates and Romanian officials.

Romania is involved in OIF to implement the multi-annual Training Plan, in French, of diplomats and public servants. The "far-program" of cooperation with OIF took place between 2004 and 2008, with about 6500 Romanian diplomats and public servants being trained as diplomats and public servants in French. Since 2019, OIF provided another program to Romania, the Francophone Institution Initiative ("Initiative Francophone d'Établissement" - IFE), aiming to consolidate the National Administration Institute (INA) as a training provider, including French. IFE started to operate in September 2018 and then interrupted its work during November 2019-August 2020 (as a result of temporary interruption of INA). The program is funded by OIF (from states' membership fees) and the Romanian party, equally. In 2021, the plan will return to normal operation. In their dialogue with OIF, MAE aims to include institutions, organizations and personalities in Romania (universities, associations and academia) among the training providers in French agreed by OIF, to offer courses and seminars within IFE, in Romania and the region.

From the point of view of institutional multilingualism, our country is an active actor to promote multilingualism within international organizations.

Romania is an active supporter of multilingualism in regional and international organizations and one of the traditional sponsors of the Resolution on multilingualism, which is adopted every other year in the plenary session of UN General Assembly. In 2019, Romania was one of the facilitators of this resolution. Most of the heads of diplomatic missions of Romania actively participate in the reunions of the Francophone Ambassadors Groups, activities organized by these groups on the International Day of francophonie and the efforts to promote multilingualism. Moreover, numerous heads of diplomatic missions of Romania abroad actively engaged in the presidency of the Francophones Ambassadors Groups (as it is/was the case in Paris, Brussels/UE, Budapest, New York, Sofia, etc.) The Heads of diplomatic missions in Romania also animate the Francophones Ambassadors Groups in many countries where there are no members, associates or observers of francophonie (such as the Netherlands, Pakistan, etc.)

Regarding the support of education, training, higher education, and research from the perspective of French education in Romania, several aspects are relevant.

There are two French international schools in Bucharest – *the French high school Anna de Noailles and École Française Internationale* (EFI, private school opened in April 2019).

There are 109 francophones routes in the secondary and vocational education, either state or private ones. Over 60 bilingual study profiles carry out their activity in Romanian schools and high schools, the highest number in all EU member states outside of France, 24 of them providing a French international baccalaureate recognized in France. 13 of them received the Excellency award *FrancEducation*, offered for three years by the French Ministry of Education. According to data from the Embassy of France in Romania, there are 18 bilingual Romanian-French high schools in Bucharest and 12 other cities, there the language instruction is fully in Romanian and French, checked and accredited by a French organism, recipients of the *FrancEducation* brand and other 5 cities with as many high schools which declare themselves Romanian-French, but which were not accredited so far.

The number of French teachers is the highest in all states in Central and Eastern Europe. At present, there are 7,500 French teachers (in 2015, their number was 9,000).

In higher education, Romania occupies the first place in Europe regarding the French study programs (except France) – 109 in the whole country in all fields – scientific, technical, legal etc. Over 300 interinstitutional partnerships unite higher education institutions and other francophone countries in the world, concluded base on academic autonomy.

The first edition of the French Olympiads took place in Cluj-Napoca, May 7-10, 2015, at the initiative of the Ministry of Education in Romania, with OIF support. Starting with 2015, the International Olympiad (which takes place, in fact, in central and Eastern Europe) was organized each time in one of the OIF member states in central and Eastern Europe. In 2018, the Olympiad was organized in northern Macedonia, while in 2019 in the Republic of Moldova. The Romanian students were each year at the top of the French International Olympiad.

On the other hand, Romania signed a series of key agreements in the field of education and research with OIF. The Agreement Memorandum between the Ministry of National Education and Research and Association of Francophone Universities (AUF) was signed in March 2016, with the aim of completing research projects, with the support of funding and expertise from AUF, within the 3<sup>rd</sup> national research plan (2015-2020).

The partnership memorandum on educational cooperation in the strategic field of francophony (2015-2022) was signed in Paris on November 25, 2017 between OIF and the Ministries of Education in Romania, Albania, Armenia and the Republic of Moldova. Later, northern Macedonia signed in their turn the memorandum in 2018, and Bulgaria initiated procedures but has not signed it yet.

An executive protocol signed between the Institute of Atomic Physics and AUF aims at 10 research projects in physics and strength of materials, durable energy, environment and biotechnology etc.

Based on the working documents of the Romanian authorities on their relationship with OIF and, respectively, the reporting sent by them about actions undertaken to promote learning French, based on the requirements of the 32<sup>rd</sup> resolution of the Ministerial Conference of Francophony (Antananarivo, November 23-24, 2016), it results that education in French remains a priority, this language preserving the status of the second modern language most used in our country. About 99% of the students in primary and

secondary education learn French as the first or second foreign language, 22% from high school students coming from the bilingual school units choose later the Romanian francophone routes. 41% of the total students in the secondary education system learn French. During the school year 2018-2019, about 1,2 million students studied French in school, out of whom 7000 students study it in either intensive or bilingual way.

Finally, academic francophony in Romania is seen as highly dynamic, sincere there are 39 universities and research institutes members of AUF, out of whom 23 public universities and 16 private ones, with a total of 60 degrees in French and, respectively, 59 master programs.

Significant elements in the country report concerning Romania, among others, appear in the 2019 edition of the OIF report entitled “La langue française dans le monde” (Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Francophony, included in the vision to promote multilingualism in international relations, is part of those vital instruments to promote an open, inclusive, educated and competitive model of society and, lately, the fundamental concept consecrated to the United Nations about Agenda 2030 for a sustainable development of the international society.

Francophony represents much more than the historical, linguistic, educational and cultural dimensions, which are all undoubtedly important. There is a prominent political francophony, supporting multilateralism in international relations to the detriment of unipolar type of models, based on the appeal to use force in the international society. Furthermore, equally, a community of democratic values, relying on affinities and a shared francophone identity and the aspirations to ensure peace, security and cooperation in international relations. Of course, the role of education in French for systems sharing such values remains vital.

Romania is part of this appealing and extended family, geographically. Given historical reasons, cultural and educational ones, but also political factors, our country has the genuine interest to preserve and consolidate this “état-far” status of francophony in our region. So much more since

demographic perspectives at the international level confirm a numeric expansion in the future of this cultural and political family. This implies, among others, that Romania articulates in the coming years a coherent educational policy and allocation of adequate resources, including ensuring a competitive academic workforce and an ongoing connection to international educational francophone networks. This strategy cannot emerge but from a politically correct vision and, respectively, through political will. There are both subjective and objective reasons, pragmatic, in this direction.

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